

Power To The People

Mr. Sean Power TD, Minister of State at the Department of Health and Children has had a long relationship with the Defence Forces. He grew up in a constituency with probably the highest concentration of resident military personnel and his father is a former Minister for Defence; so it was entirely predictable that he would develop a life-long interest in the Defence Forces. Now as a TD for Kildare South he maintains a keen interest in all Defence related political issues both at local and national level. Furthermore, since its inception he has had a close working relationship with RACO.



Where did your interest in military matters begin?

My father grew up in the Curragh and he always had a high respect and a close understanding of army life. He subsequently became Minister for Defence for a period in the early eighties and has always looked back at that time as his most memorable and favorite time in politics. He felt it was a great honor and privilege to have the opportunity to be the Minister for Defence and obviously he was very familiar with all the issues concerning the Defence Forces and its workforce. That's essentially where my knowledge of the Defence Forces and interest in military matters came from.

My first general election in 1989 happened to coincide with a lot of the unrest that existed within the ranks at the time and I was acutely aware of these problems because of the high concentration of military personnel in the Kildare constituency as it was then; apart from the installation at the Curragh and Baldonnel, there were barracks in Naas and Kildare. Shortly after that general election the representative associations RACO and PDFORRA were established by statute and from around that time I have developed a close relationship

with RACO. We have a very good working relationship and I find them very helpful when it comes to briefing me on issues, not always telling me what I want to hear, but keeping me informed. I understand their perspective on such issues and I always feel that I will get a straight and honest answer. Even during Fianna Fáil's period in opposition in the mid-1990's I was actively involved in developing our own party's Defence policy and we met frequently with RACO.

Has your promotion to Ministerial status changed your approach to constituency issues or has it had an effect on the time you have available within the area?

I have always had a great affinity with the people in Kildare and I really enjoy the so-called grass roots work and the local representations; these are of the utmost importance for all local politicians and I find that solving people's problems is a thoroughly enjoyable and very satisfying part of my work. It is something that requires a huge amount of time and energy, and

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Above: Sean Power, Kildare South TD and Minister of State at the Dept. of Health & Children.

getting representations is really the easy part; it's solving these problems that takes up the vast majority of time, effort and endeavour.

I was very satisfied to follow in my father's footsteps and get promoted to Ministerial status; certainly I am a very motivated person and it has been a career ambition of mine to become a Minister. Yes, it is a form of recognition of one's own ability, of political success and effort, and also of your position within the Fianna Fail party – but equal to these, I personally believe that it is also a form of recognition for the people of South Kildare and County Kildare in general to have a government Minister battling for them and delivering on the issues that count at the cabinet table. So I approach my ministerial portfolio with great pride and I am very dedicated to the health issues for which I have responsibility; these responsibilities take me to every corner of the country and I enjoy this; but no matter where I travel to I am first and foremost a Kildare man.

So the extra responsibilities that come with being a Minister and the countrywide travel it entails obviously puts more pressures on me and my time management to be able to provide a constantly improving service to my constituents. So my promotion has meant more work pressures, more Dáil work and a much longer working day, every day. But that's part and parcel of being a junior minister in a busy department and it's something that I take in my stride; if you have the ambition of climbing the ladder in politics or in any profession or workplace you know that more demands will be made on you from all directions – it's the same with any job and certainly it's not unique to politics. But I have to say that I draw energy from the intensity of the job and I think that I have more energy now even though I'm working harder and longer every year.

Under the Government's public service decentralisation plans, the Department of Defence offices will move to Newbridge and Defence Forces Headquarters will move to the Curragh, both of which are in your constituency. How are these projects progressing?

The Minister for Defence has told me that he expects the Department of Defence building in Newbridge to be open and fully

functioning in 2008 and that the new Defence Forces Headquarters in the Curragh to be operational not long after that. So this is a very welcome addition to the general Newbridge Curragh area and the local communities now know that these plans are becoming a reality.

The movement of Defence Forces Headquarters to the Curragh is a great idea; I know that the people living in the Curragh welcome any and all positive additions to their town that can add to its vibrancy; and 300 new jobs should hopefully do that. Certainly the move will bring other challenges; for example I am cognisant of the increased demand that will occur upon existing services such as childcare, school places, medical services. I think it is important that we are proactive rather than reactive to situations that arise. So rather than waiting for the problems to arise, an agreement now exists with the Minister for Defence to erect a custom built childcare facility in the Curragh. I have to acknowledge here that RACO has been advocating since decentralisation was announced that a childcare facility be built in the Curragh and I am aware that a partnership working group has been working on this over the last few months. One of the objectives of this plan is to try to ensure that the costs to the parents will be as low as possible and to facilitate this we are hoping that in the first instance it will be run by a board of management from the local community and also that certain costs will be borne by the Minister for Defence which will ultimately reduce the cost per child. And I think that such a facility will also become a welcome focus point for the entire community in the Curragh into the future and will lead to bigger and brighter things for this community.

For Newbridge, I think that civil servants in general have shown their approval of the Defence decentralisation to the town. For example, so many civil servants from



Sean Power's constituency has a long standing national affinity with the Defence Forces'.

various government departments applied to move to Newbridge that there were not enough vacancies to cater for them all. From the perspective of the local community in the Newbridge area, the decentralisation represents over 540 high end new jobs – over 240 to Newbridge and 300 to the Curragh; so this will have obvious benefits for the town. A lot of the civil servants who will be redeployed to Newbridge are probably already living in the Kildare area and these new offices will obviously reduce their time commuting to and from work; this will give them more time with their families and hopefully more time involved in the community. So I see this move to Newbridge as a benefit to everybody; everybody wins.

Do you think that the Defence Forces can do more to inform the public of its role?

I think that the Defence Forces have given great service to this country; its contribution to international peacekeeping over 50 years has been exemplary and in the field of peacekeeping they are internationally heralded as being among the most effective and experienced in the world. So it's something for us all to be very proud of and we all bask in that success. With my

background and knowledge of the military I am acutely aware of their successes, of the great work they do at home and abroad, and the proactive way that they have refocused and transformed the organisation over the last ten years; I think every politician knows this and anybody close to the military know this, most particularly those in Kildare; but there are many in the public who are not aware of its work.

So I always welcome seeing the Defence Forces displaying its talents and equipment at home and I was a particularly strong advocate of a special involvement of the Defence Forces in the commemoration of the 1916 rising, as well as the public displays to officially commemorate and celebrate 50 years of Defence Forces participation in United Nations peacekeeping. It is of great credit to all members of the Defence Forces and indeed to all former members that the public turned up at these parades in such large and unprecedented numbers to publicly acknowledge its admiration and respect for what soldiers do, particularly in their role as peacekeeping ambassadors for Ireland – so many have given their lives in this cause and so many have risked life and limb to improve the situation of others less fortunate than us. And people should remember that the work of the Defence Forces is a very important part of the government's foreign policy; they fly the flag in the four corners of the world and give an excellent impression of Ireland and Irish people.

About five years ago I was invited by the Defence Forces to visit the Irish troops in Lebanon, and I was there when a memorial to the Irish who had died in Lebanon was unveiled: I certainly found that to be a very moving experience; to listen to the roll call - there was so many names that I knew and people that I could remember, particularly those from around the Curragh area. For most people we all go along with our work and all work has its pressures but few of us have to confront the dangers that these people had to confront in their daily working lives or to possess and use the skills that are required in hostile areas of conflict. Therefore I think that for the future I'd like to see more of the Defence Forces in public and perhaps more of them visiting local schools and communities in order to make all the public more aware of its very proud traditions and history.

Changes in international peacekeeping and crisis management have placed increased requirements on the army; for army personnel this has brought about an increase in the frequency of overseas service abroad. What can be done to alleviate the consequential increased burden on families?

There has been a remarkable transformation of the Defence Forces' in recent years in many regards and associated with this the way the UN conducts its missions has evolved from peacekeeping to peace enforcement and crisis management operations. We've also embarked on Partnership for Peace [PfP] and become involved in EU crisis managements functions, both of which are operated under a UN Security Council mandate. Coupled with this, the civilian workplace has changed radically at home over the last 10 to 15 years and more and more spouses are in employment and pursuing their own careers than ever before. I am aware from talking to them that military personnel with families feel that the frequency of overseas tours of duty places increased pressures on the family



Sean Power's father served as defence minister during the 1980's.

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unit and on the 'stay at home spouse' and I know that the Defence Forces is aware of these societal changes and has been doing its best to mitigate these factors. So I think that some imaginative work friendly practices need to be explored that would suit the needs of the individual, male and female alike, and the organisation.

You have interfaced with the Defence Forces representations, particularly RACO; do you see their role as a positive factor within the organisation?

Before the advent of the representative associations in the Defence Forces in 1990, it was so difficult for military personnel to make their voice heard and to raise their concerns regarding issues such as their pay or their conditions of service in the Forces. And because of the nature of military service there was always certain reluctance from members to discuss the issues with anybody outside the organisation, particularly with politicians. I think it is a much healthier Ireland we are living in today, it's much more open-minded and now the representative associations, such as RACO and PDFORRA, have an independent function to act on behalf of their members. It is of great credit to them that they have always gone about their business with enthusiasm in a mature and professional manner and it's this type of positive approach that has given rise to the respect that they have earned and the many successes that they have achieved.